BYZANTINE LITERATURE AS A DISTORTING MIRROR

BY

CYRIL MANGO

BYWATER AND SOTHEBY PROFESSOR OF
BYZANTINE AND MODERN GREEK
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

An Inaugural Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
ON 21 MAY 1974

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS
1975

Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W. 1

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO

ISBN 0 19 951501 8

© *Oxford University Press 1975*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press

Printed in Great Britain
at the University Press, Oxford
by Vivian Ridler
Printer to the University

BYZANTINE LITERATURE AS A DISTORTING MIRROR

This is the second inaugural lecture I have had the privilege to deliver and I trust there will be no third. The previous one was given ten years ago in the Koraës Chair at King's College, London. On that occasion I chose a broad theme—I called it 'Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism'—and I endeavoured to show the gulf that separated the Byzantine view of the world from the mirage of 'ancient Greece reborn' that was created in Western Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century, and how these two mutually exclusive ideologies were subsequently amalgamated to produce a kind of national myth. Alas, even as I spoke, I could notice the displeasure of some members of my audience; and when, at length, my lecture was published and translated into modern Greek[1]—it appeared before the glorious revolution of 21 April 1967—I was assailed in the Athenian press not only as an ignoramus, but, worse, as a traitor for having challenged the dogma of the unbroken continuity of Hellenic culture.[2] Thus chastened, I have selected this time a less controversial subject, yet one which, I hope, is not entirely devoid of general interest.

My distinguished predecessor in the Koraës Chair, the late Romilly Jenkins, delivered this memorable dictum: 'The Byzantine Empire remains almost the unique example of a highly civilized state, lasting for more than a millennium, which produced hardly any educated writing which can be read with pleasure for its literary merit alone.'[3] Jenkins wrote these lines in about 1939, before he had immersed himself thoroughly in the study of Byzantine texts; but he did not change his mind after this immersion had taken place. In 1962, when he surveyed the Hellenistic origins of Byzantine

[1] *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxviii, 1965, pp. 29 ff. Greek version in *Ἐποχές*, 46, Feb. 1967, pp. 133 ff.

[2] And not only in the daily press. See the ponderous refutation by A. Vacalopoulos, 'Byzantinism and Hellenism', *Balkan Studies*, ix, 1968, pp. 101 ff.

[3] *Dionysius Solomós*, Cambridge, 1940, p. 57.

literature, he gave some praise to Byzantine scholars for their monumental compilations, and to Byzantine historians for their objectivity and knowledge of public affairs. But of literary and, especially, poetic merit, he had this to say: 'Byzantine civilization must be characterized from first to last, as wanting in that great gift which nature reserves for her favourites, poetic feeling and expression.'[1]

I do not wish to dispute this harsh verdict. There are some, it is true, who derive a *frisson* of mystical delight from the Hymns of Romanus the Melode, and they have been well served by my eminent predecessor here, Professor Trypanis. With this and a few other exceptions, Byzantine literature is not read for pleasure, but it is read all the same. In fact, I am sure that Michael Psellus and Anna Comnena have more readers today than they had in their own lifetime. The publication or re-publication of Byzantine texts that is being so actively pursued in our days is sufficient testimony of this. The new readers are historians in the broadest sense of the word, and they peruse Byzantine texts for the sake of information—be it purely historical, or economic, or intellectual and religious, or artistic—i.e. as a means to an end. And herein lies my subject. The historian tends to take Byzantine texts at face value. Do they offer him a true reflection of the past?

Lest I be misunderstood, I should like to make two preliminary observations. When I speak of Byzantine literature, I have in mind not only, and not even mainly belles-lettres, but the entire range of writing, exclusive of administrative and legal documents, practical manuals, and the like. Belletristic literature accounts for only a small part of this vast body of writing and is, perhaps, its least interesting part. My second observation is that Byzantine literature, thus broadly defined, falls, by and large, into two groups which, for the sake of convenience, we may designate as highbrow and lowbrow. The two groups are differentiated by language—ancient Greek in the former, contemporary or Biblical Greek in the latter. They are also normally distinguished by subject-matter and genre. These two groups of writing were addressed to different social classes. The highbrow group, at any rate after

[1] *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xvii, 1963, p. 43.

the seventh century, was confined to a small clique of educated civil servants and clergymen at Constantinople. It is important to realize how small this clique was: a recent estimate, made for the tenth century, puts at about 300 the total number of persons who at any given time were receiving secondary education.[1] Highbrow Byzantine literature had, therefore, almost no public; and once its topical interest was gone, it was usually relegated to obscurity in one or two manuscript copies. Lowbrow literature had a somewhat wider social basis, but, until the later Middle Ages, its content was entirely utilitarian and edifying. Books were scarce and fantastically expensive,[2] and the very process of reading too slow and laborious to be wasted on mere pleasure or even to be capable of yielding any pleasure. The eleventh-century provincial magnate Cecaumenos, who, in his intellectual outlook, is often regarded as the paradigm of the average Byzantine, gives some revealing advice on the subject of reading books, which he was rich enough to afford. It is a practice he strongly recommends; but, he says, one should not skip pages. One should start from the front cover and go to the very end, preferably two or three times, even if one does not understand the text, for often God grants understanding to the patient. Thus will reading be profitable; but to pick a few passages out of a book for the sake of idle gossip is a sign of frivolity.[3]

Both the highbrow and the lowbrow spheres of Byzantine literature present serious problems of interpretation, but they are not the same problems, and tonight I shall concern myself mainly with the highbrow. The most obvious feature of this literature is that it was written in a dead language and, as such, may be compared to the Latin and Greek compositions

[1] P. Lemerle, *Élèves et professeurs à Constantinople au X^e siècle*, Acad. des Inscr. et Belles-Lettres, Lecture faite dans la séance . . . du 28 nov. 1969, p. 11.

[2] The price of books in Byzantium is discussed in a forthcoming study by N. G. Wilson. For the connection between wealth and the owning of books see the characteristic passage in *Le Traité contre les Bogomiles de Cosmas le Prêtre*, ed. H.-Ch. Puech and A. Vaillant, Paris, 1945, p. 120: 'Car toi tu es riche, tu es comblé de tout, tu as l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testaments et les autres livres pleins de textes convaincants . . .' Cf. also Nicetas Paphlago, *Vita Ignatii*, *Patrol. graeca*, cv, col. 509B.

[3] *Strategicon*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt, St. Petersburg, 1896, pp. 47, 60.

that have been laboriously produced by countless generations of our schoolchildren and university students. This comparison has already been drawn by Jenkins, but for a different purpose. What I should like to point out is not that writing in a dead language can aspire to nothing higher than verbal dexterity, true though that may be; but that writing in a dead language about contemporary affairs inevitably results in the interposition of a certain distance. Of this I have practical experience, since my own professor of Greek, the late H. J. Rose, would occasionally prescribe for translation the leading article of *The Scotsman*. The resulting composition, which was intended to be comprehensible to an Athenian of the fifth century B.C., was not only riddled with qualifying clauses—'as it were', 'as one might say', 'as they call it'—not only were specific modern terms and concepts converted into their nearest classical equivalents, thus robbing them of their specificity, but the effect as a whole was suggestive of those ethnographic excursuses that one finds in ancient historians. It was as if one were writing about the strange customs of some alien and distant tribe. Exactly the same phenomenon may be discerned in highbrow Byzantine literature as early as the fifth and sixth centuries.

It has long been observed that Procopius, in his *History* of Justinian's wars, uses the most extraordinary circumlocutions whenever he has to mention a Christian term or institution. He says, e.g., 'the most temperate among the Christians whom they usually call monks', or 'the priest whom they call presbyter', or 'the writings of the Christians which they commonly call Gospels', or 'the Easter festival which Christians hold in reverence more than any other', as if he had to explain to his readers the meaning of these everyday words. Ever since Gibbon, historians have concluded that Procopius was, if not a crypto-pagan, at any rate an out-and-out sceptic; and it is only in the past ten years that two gifted scholars, Professor and Mrs. Cameron of London University, have shown in detail that this was not the case. Procopius was writing secular history in the manner and phraseology of Herodotus and Thucydides: the rules of the genre did not allow him to use barbarisms without some apology. This

affectation has been mistaken by modern scholars as a sign of religious detachment.[1]

The line between affectation and obfuscation is not easy to draw. I am sure that Procopius had no thought of misleading his readers by his neutral statements concerning the Christian faith. But consider this passage of his successor, the historian Agathias, which refers to the Persian king Chosroes Anushirvan for whose benefit certain works of Greek philosophy were allegedly translated into Pahlavi:

> They say, indeed, that he has drunk in more of the Stagirite than the Paianian [Demosthenes] did of the son of Olorus [Thucydides] and that he is full of the doctrines of Plato the son of Ariston. The *Timaeus*, they say, is not beyond him, even though it is positively studded with geometrical theory, and inquires into the movements of nature, nor is the *Phaedo*, nor the *Gorgias*, nor any other of the more subtle and obscure dialogues—the *Parmenides*, for instance, I suppose.[2]

Did Agathias mean to imply that the above Platonic dialogues were translated for the Persian King? Some scholars have taken him at his word, but Mrs. Cameron believes—and she is surely right—that Agathias is here indulging in a rhetorical flourish: he wants to impress upon us that he is conversant with Plato and the names of the dialogues. As the centuries rolled on, the tendency to embroider, to show off one's erudition in a way that actually confuses the reader, becomes more and more pronounced. One example will have to suffice.

Nicetas Magistros, a fairly obscure author of the tenth century, wrote the Life of Saint Theoctista of Lesbos in which he inserted a description of the great church on the island of Paros—the Panagia Katapoliani that is still standing. The description is not particularly specific or accurate, but it looks

[1] Averil Cameron, 'The "Scepticism" of Procopius', *Historia*, xv, 1966, pp. 466 ff. Cf. Averil and Alan Cameron, 'Christianity and Tradition in the Historiography of the Late Empire', *Class. Quarterly*, lviii, 1964, pp. 416 ff.; Averil Cameron, *Agathias*, Oxford, 1970, pp. 75 ff.

[2] *Hist.* II. 28. 2. I am quoting Mrs. Cameron's translation, 'Agathias on the Sassanians', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxiii/xxiv, 1969/70, p. 165; cf. her comment on p. 174.

genuine enough. Nicetas was especially impressed by a milky white marble of which the ciborium of the church was made, and he added what looks like a personal observation: 'I had once seen a stone such as this in a statue of Selene driving a chariot drawn by oxen.'[1] When I first encountered this passage, I was struck by what appeared to be an altogether unusual piece of visual awareness on the part of a Byzantine author. Alas, the reference to the statue of Selene turned out to be an almost literal quotation from Achilles Tatius, as a learned colleague has recently pointed out.[2]

Procopius and Agathias are our main sources for the reign of the emperor Justinian. They are reliable as far as they go, i.e. as concerns the narration of public events; but, bound as they are by the rules of secular historiography, they exclude from their narrative just about everything that made up the particular flavour of their period. If we did not possess a mass of other material, such as ecclesiastical histories, Lives of Saints, sermons, even Acts of Councils of the Church, imperial laws, and business documents, our conception of the sixth century would have been hopelessly schematic and one-sided.

The age of Justinian was, of course, very different from that of Pericles or even that of Augustus. Yet, Procopius and Agathias still lived in a world that may be described as antique. Urban life continued in the old Graeco-Roman cities; there was still a pagan minority; schools of higher learning went on functioning in several provincial centres; above all, there still existed a public of cultivated gentlemen, not only in the capital, but also at Alexandria and Antioch, at Caesarea and Gaza, not to mention many other cities. But then came the cataclysm of the seventh century, the onslaughts of Avars, Slavs, Arabs, and Bulgars, the loss of two-thirds of

[1] *Acta Sanctorum*, Nov. iv. 226B.

[2] L. G. Westerink, *Nicétas Magistros: Lettres d'un exilé*, Paris, 1973, p. 43 n. 1. Much more telling, not to say monstrous, instances of obfuscation may be quoted from the writings of Arethas of Caesarea, e.g. his *Χοιροσφάκτης ἢ Μισογόης* (ed. L. G. Westerink, *Arethae scripta minora*, i, Leipzig, 1968, pp. 200 ff.) which has confused modern scholars to no small extent; but it would take too long to explain both what Arethas appears to be saying and how he has been misunderstood.

the Empire's lands, the virtual disruption of urban life. The Byzantine state that emerged from this convulsion was barbarized and thoroughly medieval; yet, by some miracle, a small educated élite continued to exist at Constantinople and, from the ninth century to the fifteenth, they went on writing highbrow literature in ancient Greek. If we are disturbed by the discrepancy between reality and its literary reflection in Procopius and Agathias, how much more pronounced, not to say grotesque, had this discrepancy become by the time of Constantine Porphyrogenitus or Alexius Comnenus!

The continuation of erudite literature was made possible by the survival of secular education in its antique, i.e. rhetorical form. The curriculum, based on a combination of pagan and Early Christian authorities, remained unchanged and no textbook later than the sixth century was introduced. The privileged Byzantine boy learnt his grammar from Apollonius Dyscolus and the *Epimerismi in Psalmos* by George Choeroboscus, his rhetoric from Hermogenes of Tarsus and Aphthonius, his logic from Porphyry's *Eisagoge*. The same blend of pagan and Early Christian is discernible in the literary models that were proffered for imitation: Saint Gregory Nazianzen had taken his place beside Demosthenes, and the Christian Synesius beside the pagan Libanius.[1] What applied to literary excellence applied equally to the sciences: medicine, astronomy, geography, philosophy, botany, even agricultural theory had all reached their definitive and canonical form in Late Antiquity. It is interesting to observe that the *Bibliotheca* of Photius, which consists of the notices or summaries of 279 works and represents, I believe, nearly the entire reading matter of a uniquely cultivated man, contains no more than four works later than about the year 600, i.e. pertaining to the 250 years prior to the composition of the *Bibliotheca*.[2] Likewise, the tenth-century *Souda* furnishes only a minimal amount of information on medieval Byzantine

[1] We still lack a comprehensive study of the curriculum of Byzantine schools. In the meantime, see P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin*, Paris, 1971, pp. 252 ff.

[2] Codd. 66, 67, 170, 233. I am not counting conciliar Acts and Lives of saints.

authors. The world of culture and useful knowledge lay in a distant past.

Among the literary genres bequeathed to Byzantium by Antiquity was the Dialogue in its Platonic and Lucianic forms. Down to the fifteenth century such dialogues continued to be written, and several of them—like the anonymous *Philopatris*, the *Phlorentios* by Nicephorus Gregoras, and the *Dialogue with a Persian* by the emperor Manuel II Palaeologus—were inspired by specific historical circumstances. Dialogue form has, of course, a certain built-in artificiality, but it does not preclude, in fact it even encourages, the introduction of realistic touches. A modern, yet sufficiently traditional example, like the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* by Joseph de Maistre, will make this plain. You will allow me to consider a Byzantine dialogue. It is by Michael Psellus, the famous polymath of the eleventh century, and is entitled *Τιμόθεος ἢ περὶ δαιμόνων*, usually referred to as *De operatione daemonum*.[1] This is a work of some notoriety. During the Renaissance it was considered as a serious treatise on demonology, and was first published, in a Latin version by Marsilio Ficino, in 1497;[2] a French version, intended as a weapon against the Protestants, then suspected of diabolical practices, followed in 1573.[3] Victor Hugo quotes it in his *Notre-Dame de Paris*,[4] though on the mistaken assumption that it had something to do with alchemy. More recently, the *De operatione* has been studied as a document of heresiology with particular reference to the Bogomils, and has been discussed by eminent scholars such as Bidez, Puech, Sir Steven Runciman, and Dimitri Obolensky.[5] Émile Renauld, the foremost modern exponent

[1] Ed. J. F. Boissonade, Nürnberg, 1838; *Patrol. graeca*, cxxii, cols. 817 ff. (reprinting the ed. by G. Gaulmin, Paris, 1615). I am quoting from the latter edition.

[2] Ficino's translation is based on a somewhat divergent Greek text which has been published by J. Bidez, *Michel Psellus: Épître sur la Chrysopée*, Catal. des manuscrits alchimiques grecs, vi, Brussels, 1928, pp. 119 ff.

[3] See É. Renauld, 'Une traduction française du *Περὶ ἐνεργείας δαιμόνων* de Michel Psellos', *Rev. ét. grecques*, xxxiii, 1920, pp. 56 ff.

[4] Bk. 7, ch. 5.

[5] Bidez, op. cit., pp. 97 ff.; Puech and Vaillant, op. cit., pp. 139 ff.; S. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee*, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 90 ff.; D. Obolensky, *The Bogomils*, Cambridge, 1948, pp. 183 ff. Cf. also Ch. Zervos, *Un philosophe néoplatonicien du XI^e siècle: Michel Psellos*, Paris, 1919, pp. 199 ff.; M. Wellnhofer, 'Die thrakischen Euchiten', *Byzant. Zeitschr.* xxx, 1929/30, pp. 477 ff.; P. Joannou, 'Les croyances démonologiques au XI^e siècle à Byzance', *Actes du VI^e Congrès Intern. d'Études Byzantines*, i, Paris, 1950, pp. 245 ff.; id., *Démonologie populaire — démonologie critique au XI^e siècle*, Wiesbaden, 1971.

of Michael Psellus, has praised the *De operatione* as being, on the one hand, a precious historical source and, on the other, an exquisite specimen of the Byzantine literary language.[1]

We have before us a dialogue between two persons called Timotheus and Thrax who meet at Byzantium. Thrax has been absent for two years in the course of which he has come in contact with a group of heretics called Euchites or Enthusiasts. Pressed by Timotheus, he gives an account of their revolting practices, which included the eating of excrement, incest, the sacrifice of new-born infants, and devil-worship, and then launches into a detailed discussion of the nature and operation of demons. His informant on this score had been a Mesopotamian monk, called Mark, whom he encountered in northern Greece. Finally, the two friends part as it is about to rain.

The scholars who have studied this text have drawn from it a variety of conclusions. Some believe that the Euchites were simply Bogomils. Yet the doctrines and practices described by Psellus do not tally very well with those of the Bogomils as known to us from other sources; hence the conclusion that Psellus is indeed speaking of Euchites, i.e. Massalians; and this, in turn, is taken as proof of the existence of this ancient sect as late as the eleventh century. As to the doctrines themselves, some scholars accept them at face value, while others believe that they have been borrowed from much older, Neoplatonic sources, especially from Proclus. On only one point is everyone agreed, namely that Psellus's Euchites were living in Thrace, although the text places them squarely in Thessaly and the Chalcidic peninsula.[2]

[1] Loc. cit. In his *Étude de la langue et du style de Michel Psellos*, Paris, 1920, p. 438, Renauld goes so far as to say that the style of the *De operatione* is not unworthy of Plato.

[2] This mistake may be partly due to the fact that one of the interlocutors is called Thrax. The reason for this fictitious name is not immediately apparent. Thrax (who may conceal a real person) seems to have been sent from Constantinople on a mission to hunt out heretics, and was empowered to use torture

Imagine now that the *De operatione* had come down to us anonymously, like so many other works of Byzantine literature. Would anyone have dated it in the eleventh century? I think not. Indeed, on internal evidence one could build a strong case for a date no later than the sixth century, after which time the Euchites all but disappeared from view. Their original home is thought to have been in Mesopotamia and, in fact, the monk Mark is described by Psellus as a Mesopotamian. The abominations of the Euchites are said by him to be shared by the Gnostics,[1] which again points to an early period since there were no Gnostics in the eleventh century. At one point Timotheus exclaims: 'No one has heard of such evil, neither among the Celts, nor in the midst of whatever lawless and savage tribe inhabits Britain!'[2] Here, surely, is a remark that was made at a time when people at Constantinople had but a dim awareness of the extreme west of Europe and when the British Isles were still pagan. Timotheus then tells a little story. When he was a boy he was worried by the thought that liberal education and all other good things were declining. He consulted his grandfather who assured him that not only would there be no improvement, but that

in interrogating suspects. I see no reason to suppose that he was a military commander. The topographical indications furnished by the text are the following: 1. Thrax encountered his informant, the monk Mark, in the Chersonese which borders on Hellas, *περὶ χερρόνησον τὴν ὅμορον Ἑλλάδος* (col. 840); 2. He apprehended a possessed heretic at Elasson, *ἐν Ἐλασσῶνι*. This man had prophesied that somebody would be sent out against his sect, would capture him, and try to take him prisoner to Byzantium. He had made this prediction, says Thrax, 'when I had not yet gone beyond the villages next to Byzantium' (col. 853). The Chersonese cannot be the peninsula forming the north shore of the Dardanelles, since it is described as being adjacent to Hellas—a name which, in the Byzantine as in the Classical period, normally denoted Greece proper, south of Thessaly. Hence Psellus is probably referring to the Chalcidic peninsula which, though not exactly bordering on Hellas, is, at any rate, sufficiently close. As for Elasson, it lies, of course, south of Mount Olympus. This topographical correction is of some significance. As long as the Euchites were supposed to be concentrated in Thrace, they could be connected, via the Armenian and Syrian settlements in that country, with the Paulicians and Massalians, as several scholars have connected them. Note, incidentally, that *ἐν Ἐλασσῶνι* is the vulgate reading; some manuscripts have *Ἐχασᾶνι* or *Χερσῶνι*. I cannot take seriously the ingenious suggestion by P. Peeters that one ought to read *Ἐλασᾶνι* = el-Hassân, 'car une localité de ce nom, située près de Kaškar en Babylonie, a été l'un des foyers du Manichéisme' (in Bidez, op. cit., p. 117).

[1] Col. 829.

[2] Col. 836.

the end of the world was at hand and men would behave like wild beasts. One would see again all the horrors of the Dionysiac mysteries; the abominable deeds told in the Greek tragedies would be repeated: Cronus, Thyestes, and Tantalus would devour their children, Oedipus would lie with his mother, and Cinyras with his daughter.[1] Does this not point to a time when paganism was still a live issue? Was not the decline of liberal education expressed by the closing of the schools of Athens by Justinian? Was not the end of the world expected in the year 501 which marked the end of the sixth millennium after the Creation?[2] I could go even further. Demons, Psellus tells us, were heard at times to speak in Greek, at other times in Chaldaean, in Persian, or in Syriac.[3] We are, therefore, dealing with a period before the Arab conquest. Now observe the following detail. Timotheus is made to say that his sister-in-law was once possessed by a demon and was heard speaking in a barbarous and incomprehensible tongue. After much inquiry it was ascertained that the language in question was Armenian, which was all the stranger since the poor woman had never laid eyes on an Armenian.[4] The first migration of Armenians to Constantinople occurred in 571 and a few years later great numbers of them were settled in Thrace by the emperor Maurice.[5] From that time on the Armenian element became so widespread in the Byzantine Empire that the sound of their language could not have been found so utterly alien.

I have deliberately developed this fallacious argument. The *De operatione* is by Michael Psellus and so must date from about the middle of the eleventh century. Yet it does not contain a single element that might reveal the actual time of its composition. Psellus may well be speaking of the Bogomils. If he calls them Euchites, it is because he wants to give them an

[1] Col. 833.

[2] According to the era of Julius Africanus, or in 507/8 according to that of Panodorus. It was widely believed that the end of the world would fall within the reign of Anastasius I (491–518). See P. J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek*, Washington D.C., 1967, pp. 118 ff.

[3] Col. 860.

[4] Col. 857.

[5] See P. Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, Lisbon, *c.* 1963, pp. 13 ff.

old name and a Greek name at that. This is not evidence of the survival of the Massalian sect. In the practices of the Bogomils he probably had little interest; but he used them as a peg upon which to hang his own bookish knowledge of demonology. Students of heresies may take note. We are accustomed to the fact that Byzantine authors called the Russians Scythians, the Turks Persians, and the Bulgarians Mysians (instead of the more appropriate Moesians). Could Psellus have introduced the shocking term *Πογόμιλοι* into a Platonic dialogue?

The example of the *De operatione* serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it shows a close adherence to an antique literary genre which determines its form and its language. On the other hand, the time and setting that it evokes are neither antique nor medieval, but those of the Early Christian Empire. A very different example may help us to further illustrate the latter point.

The emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus is a figure of central importance for every byzantinist. He was not so much an original author as a compiler; yet it is from his compilations that we derive much of our knowledge of Byzantine administration, court ceremonial, and foreign relations. The purpose of his literary endeavours was, moreover, practical and didactic, and to this end he even condescended at times to using ordinary Greek.[1] Even so, we cannot say that his works offer us a true reflection of the Empire in the tenth century, so inextricably mixed is contemporary with antiquarian information. Take the treatise called *De thematibus*, which is an account of the provinces, called 'themes', into which the Empire was divided, their origin, their principal cities, and their inhabitants.[2] It is not a work of literature, but in so far as it is the only 'geopolitical' treatise that we have of the Byzantine Empire, it is a document of primary importance; furthermore, had Constantine wished so, he could have gathered a mass of precise information from provincial governors, army commanders, and fiscal agents. But not at all: he preferred to consult Strabo, Dionysius Periegetes, Stephanus Byzantinus, and especially Hierocles, an author of the sixth century. The result is an extraordinary mosaic of snippets, most of which have no relevance to the tenth century. In speaking of the province of the Thrakesians, i.e. western Asia Minor, Constantine tells us, for example, that its population consists of 'Lydians, Maeonians, Carians, and Ionians; and the Ionians are those who inhabit Miletus and Ephesus, while those who live inland are the Sardians, Lydians, Maeonians, Carians, and the inhabitants of the Lesser Phrygia.'[1] The next province, that of Opsikion, i.e. north-west Asia Minor, is inhabited by 'Bithynians, Mysians, Phrygians, Dardanians, and Trojans.'[2] This information is given in the present tense. The fifteenth province in Constantine's enumeration is Cyprus, although it did not belong to the Empire at the time and had not, in fact, belonged to it for nearly 300 years. Yet he begins his account of the island by saying that Cyprus is governed by a *consularis*, i.e. a senator, and contains thirteen cities which he duly enumerates, starting with Constantia.[3] This information is borrowed directly from Hierocles who, as I have said, wrote in the sixth century. Of Sicily, which in Constantine's time was under the Arabs, he says: 'It is now held under the authority of Constantinople, for the Emperor of Constantinople rules the sea as far as the Pillars of Hercules.' This statement does not appear to be borrowed from any known source and may, therefore, represent what ought, ideally, to have been the case, even if Byzantine ships had not been in sight of Gibraltar since the early eighth century. The truth, of course, was well known to Constantine, who adds, without sensing the contradiction, that all the towns of Sicily are held by the godless Saracens, 'and only Calabria, which is opposite, is in Christian hands'.[4]

The difficulties which the historian has to overcome in dealing with a text like the *De thematibus* are all too obvious: he has to sift out all the antiquarian passages before he obtains

[1] In the Preface to the *Book of Ceremonies* (ed. A. Vogt, i, Paris, 1935, p. 2) Constantine makes this significant statement: 'With a view to making our work clear and understandable, we have employed the simpler style of ordinary speech, and those very words and terms which a long time ago were applied to each object and are so used.' Had he written in a higher style, he would, of course, have eschewed all such precise terms.

[2] Ed. A. Pertusi, Studi e Testi, 160, Vatican City, 1952.

[1] Ibid., p. 68. [2] Ibid., p. 69. [3] Ibid., p. 80. [4] Ibid., pp. 94 ff.

a residue that may be applicable to the tenth century. In so doing he will discover that the documentation on which Constantine drew is, to a large extent, still available to us, and that his knowledge of the 'dark centuries'—the seventh and the eighth—was no less sketchy than ours. This is the historian's task. For my part, I should like to emphasize a different point: it is that Constantine, even in a work as factual as the *De thematibus*, conveys the impression that he is an unwilling participant in the affairs of the tenth century, while his real world, the one he is at home in, belongs to a bygone and happier age. The very institution of the themes is somehow distasteful to him: he sees them as inglorious little bits of territory into which the diminished Empire of the Romans was carved up, and this at a time when the emperors had forgotten 'their ancestral Latin tongue',[1] and so designated them by the vulgar Greek term *themata*. No decent historical author uses such a word; there were no themes in the days of Julius Caesar, of the admirable Augustus, of the famous Trajan, of Constantine the Great and Theodosius who embraced the true religion. Does Strabo, does Menippus, does Scylax of Caryanda, does Pausanias mention the Armeniac theme?[2] No, gentle reader, this is but a new-fangled barbarism.

The examples I have quoted are neither unrepresentative nor tendentious; and if they express a general truth about Byzantine letters, we should try, in conclusion, to define it.

We have found that Byzantine literary works tend to be divorced from the realities of their own time while remaining anchored in an ideal past. This judgement is reinforced by the lack of interest which the Byzantines themselves showed in their own authors: biographical details and dates are seldom supplied.[3] It is also a matter of common experience that an anonymous Byzantine text of a literary character is very difficult, sometimes impossible, to date: witness the case of the *Philopatris* which, after centuries of scholarly discussion, has come to rest in the last quarter of the tenth century—assuming this date to be right. To put it more simply, Byzantine literature was static, locked within the bounds of its inherited

[1] Studi e Testi, 160, p. 60. [2] Ibid., p. 63.
[3] Cf. Westerink, *Nicétas Magistros*, pp. 11 f.

conventions. It was also, on the highbrow level, universal in the sense that it did not exhibit any local variations.

It is interesting to observe that a similar judgement has been expressed in a different context, that of medieval Russian literature, whose Byzantine character is very pronounced. One of the best connoisseurs of this literature, V. M. Istrin, has put it this way:

> The literature of the eleventh to the thirteenth century is marked by a negative quality which consists in the absence of an idea content (*idejnost'*) . . . This absence should not be understood in the sense that the works of this period were mere literary exercises . . . Yet we cannot observe, first, that any specific idea was consistently put forward by Russian writers in a given century or, second, that an idea which arose at a given time was gradually altered and replaced by a new one . . . Such a development is unknown in the literature of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, and its works, no matter where and when they were produced, did not have that internal connection which would have obliged us to derive one work from a previous one, or one group of works from another.[1]

The dichotomy between literature and a changing reality is, I believe, one of the salient features of Byzantine culture. The business of everyday life was not considered a suitable subject for literary treatment. Many Byzantines travelled to strange lands, went on missions to Baghdad and Kiev, performed pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, spent years in captivity among the Arabs, yet not one of them has recorded his experiences and observations. The only apparent exception —a personal account of a mission to the northern barbarians in the tenth century (I refer to the so-called *Toparcha Gothicus* fragments)—has recently been shown to be a nineteenth-century forgery.[2] I have no doubt that even Byzantine intellectuals exchanged stories of their adventures and did so in *dimotiki*, not in Attic Greek. But literature was something else. It resided on a higher level while, at the same time, serving the practical purpose of establishing a man's position within an exclusive professional caste. It was not meant to change

[1] *Očerk istorii drevnerusskoj literatury domoskovskogo perioda*, Petrograd, 1922, p. vi.
[2] See I. Ševčenko, 'The Date and Author of the So-called Fragments of Toparcha Gothicus', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxv, 1971, pp. 115 ff.

with the times, but rather to maintain a constant relation to its models. This is an attitude that survived in later Greek letters, certainly until the Revolution of 1821.[1]

Thus, Byzantine literature is both a dim and a distorting mirror. But, we may ask, is not some of the distortion of our own making? Is not the decoding of any past literature an interaction between text and reader? The texts, to use another metaphor, emit certain signals which, in our case, happen to be misleading. These signals are picked up by the readers, who often are, and indeed ought to be, classicists. They have been educated in those classics which we consider to be the best, while they have little familiarity with the authors of the Second Sophistic, the Cappadocian Fathers, and those late anthologies from which Byzantine authors drew most of their ancient tags. Always on the look-out for classical survivals or revivals, they inevitably fall into the very trap which Byzantine texts have set for them, and they see the chief significance of the Empire in its having transmitted to us the heritage of ancient Greek letters. Even the great historian Ernst Stein could say that Byzantium was 'l'Antiquité dans le moyen âge'.[2]

In reality Byzantium was something quite different and perhaps more interesting; and it is the discovery of its true self behind its antique mask that ought to occupy those of us who pursue this discipline.

[1] It would be instructive to trace the persistence of Byzantinism in Greek letters in the period 1453–1821. I am giving one example at random because it offers a perfect pendant to the attitude of Constantine Porphyrogenitus quoted in p. 14 n. 1 above. Martin Crusius, the Tübingen professor, wrote to Theodosios Zygomalas at Constantinople asking him for various items of historical information and for specimens of modern Greek (*ἀνταιτούμενος δὲ χυδαίων λέξεων σαφήνειαν, ἐπιστολάς τε δημοτικὰς καὶ ἄλλα φιλομαθίας, ἀλλ' οὐ σπουδῆς*). Zygomalas, who replied in 1581 in as elevated a style as he could manage, was clearly embarrassed by this request and referred contemptuously to the spoken tongue, 'which is a hodge-podge of many languages' (M. Crusius, *Turcograecia*, Basle, 1584, p. 75). Note, in particular, the contrast he makes between *σπουδή* (requiring classical Greek) and the inferior category of *φιλομαθία*, i.e. curiosity, which demanded the clarity of vulgar words. There are also some amusing instances of the same attitude in the Letters of Alexander Mavrokordato to which I drew attention in 'The Phanariots and the Byzantine Tradition', in *The Struggle for Greek Independence*, ed. R. Clogg, London, 1973, p. 52.

[2] 'Introduction à l'histoire et aux institutions byzantines', *Traditio*, vii, 1949/51, p. 96.